

Iowa Outdoors

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

www.iowadnr.gov

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2007 WAS A SAFE HUNTING YEAR

By Joe Wilkinson
Iowa Department of Natural Resources

Sometimes, a downward trend is a good thing. Iowa hunters have chalked up another year with no firearm related deaths and—if the pace continues--are on track for perhaps the safest hunting decade on record.

On the other hand, there *was* one hunting death, a bowhunter falling from a tree stand. That incident, along with 13 shooting-related injuries in 2007, shows there is always work to do. Still, the downward curve is encouraging. “Looking at our firearm related incidents, we have those numbers just about as low as we can get them,” assesses Rod Slings, safety education coordinator for the Department of Natural Resources. “Hunter education became mandatory in Iowa in 1983. With those people out there now, it is making a difference. We are seeing the success of the program.”

You don’t have to look far to see the graphic difference. In 1965, 20 people died in hunting incidents. It was not uncommon in the 1960s and early ‘70s to have 10 or 12 hunting deaths and 60 to 140 injuries, *in a year!* Voluntary hunter education was initiated and the numbers started dropping. Since becoming mandatory, that curve has been bumping at around zero, one or two deaths a year. There is now an entire generation of Iowans certified in hunter education before they can purchase a license.

Those figures come in an era when about 250,000 of us buy hunting, furharvester, lifetime or preserve hunting licenses in a year. Add to that total many of the tens of thousands of landowners and tenants with deer or turkey tags. Unless they also hunt *off*

their land, they do not need hunting licenses.

The requirement for blaze orange clothing deserves some credit. Firearm deer hunters are quite visible to others with vests, coats or coveralls of mandatory blaze orange covering their torsos. Upland bird hunters are now required to wear an item (cap, coat, gloves) that is at least 50 percent blaze orange. For the most part, though, the primary credit goes to 1,800 volunteer instructors in hunter education classes.

In those sessions, held anywhere from county nature centers and fish and game clubhouses, to sporting good stores and school classrooms, kids learn proper handling of firearms and a whole lot more. And not just kids. Parents often stick around for the 10 hours of instruction and hands-on training. A growing number of participants are young adults who didn't take them when younger and now are friends with—or married to—some one who hunts.

The classes also stress hunter ethics, wildlife identification, trailing game, first aid and other issues. In recent years, more attention has been paid to bowhunting and tree stand safety. That takes on added emphasis after this past fall. “We did have one fatality (in Madison County) which resulted from a tree stand fall. We had several injuries, too,” says Slings. “That is an area we are concerned about. It used to be just bow hunters. Now, more muzzleloader and shotgun hunters seem to be hunting from an elevated device. We want to make sure you secure yourself with a full body harness.”

That full harness is aimed at replacing old-fashioned ‘belt’ or shoulder-only gear. While they can prevent a fall all the way to the ground, serious internal injury or suffocation can result with all the impact on just a couple points of your body. The full harness directs much of that pressure to the legs and shoulders. Students in many classes are shown how to strap themselves in. Some even have a stand from which they can ‘fall’ just a few inches to understand how the gear works. They also are taught to keep three points of contact (hands, feet, strap) as you climb up to, or down from, an elevated stand.

Slings says that a million stands a year are sold under auspices of the Treestand Manufacturers Association. Any TMA stand includes a safety harness with the purchase.

Incidents Fall; But Potential Remains

Iowa hunters may deserve a pat on the back for the drop in hunting related incidents. Just don't make it a long one. And make sure that gun is held safely while you do it. A ‘no fatality’ year is great, but 13 injuries and three property damage incidents in 2007 are reminders that any incident could have been much worse.

I was along for two shooting investigations in northeast Iowa, during the first shotgun deer season in December. In one, a young hunter shot one of his best friends in the upper leg. The shot came from 250 yards away. On the scene a couple hours later as officers interviewed witnesses and took measurements, I couldn't help but think that if the two hunters had been closer or if the gun had been aimed just a fraction of an inch

higher, it could have been much worse.

Even without a shot being fired, conservation officers see the prospect for tragedy during their stops. “I still cite hunters firing over a road, or firing from the road,” says officer Erika Billerbeck, who patrols Johnson County during the hunting seasons. “We still run into occasional uncased or loaded guns in a vehicle or complaints of shots fired too close to houses. If it’s that close, something could happen. The potential is there.”

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[Electronic photos available]

IOWA TRUMPETER SWANS TAKE LONG DISTANCE ROAD TRIP

By Lowell Washburn

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

Most migrating birds travel by air. But for a flock of 18 young trumpeter swans, the winter migration has taken a unique twist. Instead of using their wings, these hitchhiking waterfowl are taking the interstate highway --- and they’re taking it all the way to sunny Arkansas.

According to DNR Trumpeter Swan Restoration Coordinator, Ron Andrews, the experiment is literally a round about attempt aimed at increasing future swan numbers in Iowa.

After being herded into a livestock trailer, the flock departed northern Iowa on Jan. 22. Upon arrival in Arkansas, the birds will be released early Wednesday at Buffalo River National Park. The effort is a cooperative joint venture between the Iowa DNR, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, The Trumpeter Swan Society, and the Arkansas Game & Fish Commission.

“The DNR has been releasing captive produced young swans on state wetlands since 1995,” said Andrews. “The goal of these efforts has been to reestablish a wild, free flying population of trumpeter swans to Iowa. So far, the program has been successful to the point that we were able to inventory 30 successful nesting pairs during 2007.”

Andrews feels that Iowa’s trumpeter swan population is nearing a “threshold level” and will soon achieve self sustaining numbers. In the meantime, biologists continue to bolster the flock with annual releases of more captive produced birds. Scientists have noted, however, that young swans [cygnets] raised by wild, free flying parents are enjoying a much higher survival than birds released from captivity.

“Trumpeter swans are extremely hardy birds, and don’t normally head south until really severe weather sets in,” said Andrews. “Birds produced in the wild have the benefit of parental supervision. Families stick together through the winter and the adults lead the way south. By contrast, captive reared youngsters are out there on their own.

When wetlands begin to freeze tight, they're forced to sort things out on their own. Without knowing where to go, many of those birds end up in trouble.

"The whole purpose of the Arkansas experiment is to increase the survival of those captive reared, young swans," said Andrews. "Until these 18 young birds were captured last week, they had been free flying in the vicinity of their captive, wing-clipped parents. Those free flights have hopefully finely tuned their inner compass and will guide the birds back north next spring. Once they successfully complete the first round trip, the route will be permanently filed in their memory bank. As those birds become adult breeders they will be able to show their own young the safest way south."

During the next three years, the DNR hopes to send more than 100 young swans to Arkansas wetlands. The cygnets are marked with green, numbered neck collars that will help biologists keep tabs on the swans as they travel the flyways.

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IOWA STATE ARCHERY CHAMPIONSHIPS MARCH 1 IN DES MOINES

DES MOINES – The National Archery in the Schools Program (NASP) Iowa State Archery Championship will be held from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., March 1, during the Iowa Deer Classic. The event will be held at the Iowa Events Center, lower level of Hy-Vee Hall, in Des Moines. This is the first year for the event.

The event is limited to 13 teams, each with 10 to 15 archers. Teams must be part of the current NASP participating schools to enter. All registrations are due Feb. 16. Teams will select their flight times on a first come, first serve basis.

Individual and team awards will be presented in the High School, Middle School and Elementary School divisions. The first place team and individuals in each division qualifies to attend the NASP National Championship. The top boy and top girl senior archers will each receive a \$1,000 scholarship prize.

The 2008 Iowa program sponsors include the Iowa State Archery Association, Iowa Deer Classic, National Wild Turkey Federation Iowa Chapter, Delta Sports Products, LLC, Iowa Bowhunters Association, Whitetails Unlimited, NASP, and the DNR's Shooting Sports Program.

For more information, contact Ben Berka, DNR shooting sports coordinator, at 515-281-0140 or at ben.berka@dnr.iowa.gov.

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ANNUAL RIVER CLEANUP ROUTE AND DATES ANNOUNCED

DES MOINES – The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is looking for adventuresome volunteers to take part in the sixth annual Project AWARE (A Watershed Awareness River Expedition) river cleanup and water quality monitoring initiative.

This year's river cleanup expedition will tackle about 87 miles of the Winnebago, Shell Rock and Cedar rivers from June 14 to 21. The route will launch from Mason City and float through Rockford, Marble Rock, Greene, Clarksville and Shell Rock before landing in Cedar Falls. Volunteers participate by floating the river in a kayak or canoe and cleaning up river trash along the way. While the expedition lasts an entire week, volunteers may stay and help for as little or as long as they like.

Project AWARE combines river cleanup, recreation and education into a meaningful and rewarding experience for volunteers. Past participants have said that AWARE is one of the greatest ways for someone to connect with nature and make a difference in protecting it.

In the five-year history of Project AWARE, the expedition has sported an impressive track record, enlisting 863 participants who have cleaned up more than 400 river miles and four different lakes, and removed 1,000 cubic yards of trash, of which 85 percent was recycled. Volunteers have also restored native prairie, renovated trails and enhanced recreational areas.

While the work can be tough and dirty, the expedition is really one of a kind.

"It's a lot of fun. The people are amazing. When you can get people to take a vacation just to pick up trash, that's something," said Don Propst, a Project AWARE veteran.

Project AWARE is an initiative of the DNR's IOWATER, Water Trails and Keepers of the Land programs.

For more information on this event and to download the registration materials, please visit www.iowaprojectaware.com or contact Project AWARE by email at iowater@iowater.net or phone Jackie Gautsch at (319) 335-1761.

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